

PREFACE

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Amidst the ongoing rhetoric surrounding school reform and especially in light of the initial implementation of the Common Core State Standards, the key stakeholders in the discourse continue to be the teachers and the students who interact in the middle grades. Therefore, this issue of *Middle School Research Journal* provides a compelling array of research-based findings about effective instruction in the middle grades. In keeping with our new publication structure of three expanded issues for each volume, this “open call” issue contains six articles, each uniquely informative. Together they provide interesting research-based information on the lived experiences of teachers and students in the middle grades.

In the first article, Howell, Cook, and Faulkner explore the perceptions of middle level principals regarding the concept of effectiveness, in three areas: how they defined effectiveness; the practices of effective teachers; and the preparation of newly hired middle level teachers. Having acknowledged the diverse models of teacher preparation for the middle grades, the authors have proposed a refined framework for effective middle level practices. They conclude that effective middle level teachers must adhere to the principles

that were conceived by pioneers in middle level education and summarized in the framework that they have constructed. That framework is both straightforward and comprehensive, offering clear perspectives on how middle level teachers can best serve the needs of their students.

The second article also examines the preparation of middle level preservice teachers, specifically through service learning experiences. In a self-study of her own pedagogical practices, Harrison explores the professional development and personal growth of her preservice undergraduate teacher candidates who conducted field experiences in high needs schools in rural Midwestern Appalachia. Not only did these preservice teachers engage in fieldwork in these high needs areas, they interacted actively in the community by constructing and implementing specific service learning projects that addressed the needs of the community. Harrison reflects on the effectiveness of the paradigm and her own practice as a teacher-educator.

The third article turns our attention to practicing teachers’ use of specific pedagogy, that is, inquiry learning through the use of historical simulations in middle level social studies classes. Citing the tenets of *This We Believe*,

Gradwell and DiCamillo present a case study of a middle level teacher who effectively used simulations to bring history alive to his eighth grade students. They describe in depth this teacher's effective use of inquiry learning and his developmentally responsive interaction with his students. They conclude that purposeful implementation of good pedagogy can hook middle level students into learning about the past in ways that will inform their future.

The Common Core State Standards have placed informational texts into the forefront of school reform in the United States. At the same time, education policymakers point to the effectiveness of educational systems in the international arena. The fourth article in this issue brings an international perspective to the understanding of how students in middle grades, specifically Grade 5 and 6, comprehend and process informational text. Merchie and Van Keer, two Belgian scholars, present their research on "mind mapping" as a strategy that might enhance students' comprehension of informational texts. Their research, conducted in Belgium, suggests that specific and strategic instruction regarding informational texts can effectively increase student proficiency. The student work samples, although not in English, nevertheless graphically illustrate the increase in students' fluency over the course of strategy instruction. Most importantly, this article reinforces the need to look outside the national arena for insights concerning a universal problem.

The Common Core State Standards have also placed renewed emphasis on workplace readiness skills. In the next article, Strom, Thompson, and Strom, focus on developing workplace readiness through students' self and peer evaluation of teamwork skills in cooperative learning environments. Having surveyed 297 middle grade students in inclusive classrooms, including 39 in special education, the

authors present cogent arguments about the importance of teamwork skills in the workplace and how schools can foster the development of these skills. They elaborate on the differences between self-evaluation and peer evaluation among students in general education and those in special education. Ultimately, they propose ways in which teachers can address those differences.

In the final article, Kennedy-Lewis provides a compelling summary of how some students fail to thrive in the middle grades, often falling prey to changes in environment when transitioning from elementary to middle grades. Her qualitative study of 11 "persistently disciplined" urban students highlights a "discipline gap" between White students and students of color. Her findings suggest that student disengagement leading to "getting in trouble" derive from several factors, including their relationships with their teachers, the modes of curriculum delivery, and typical adolescent developmental changes. Drawing from the words of her participants, Kennedy-Lewis provides sound suggestions for ways in which teachers can help address the often turbulent transition of some young adolescents into the middle grades.

In this issue of *Middle Grades Research Journal*, we have strived to continue the tradition of providing cutting edge research in a variety of formats and venues that can combine to inform our readers of the key issues facing middle level educators. The current environment of teacher accountability and standardization of instruction continues to challenge both teachers and students. The articles we present in this issue offer glimpses of places where good pedagogy and dedicated teachers continue to address the unique and important world of youngsters in the middle grades.